

## Voices of Veterans Interview with Donald Eugene Lawless

Date: December 19, 2005

Location: Phone interview from Mr. Lawless' home in San Antonio, Texas

Interviewer: Bonita LaRue

**Interviewer:** This is Bonita LaRue, and today I'm interviewing Donald Eugene Lawless of San Antonio. He's a Korean War veteran, and he's going to tell us about his story. I would like to start off by asking you some questions leading up to the war. Did you decide that you wanted to enlist and go into Army, or were you drafted?

**Lawless:** I came from Canada in 1948 and at that time there was a draft on, and I thought that it would be better to – if I was going to be drafted – to go in the Army and get it over before I went to work, which is totally wrong. It just works the opposite way. If you had a job and then you went into the Army, all the time you're in the Army, you're accruing seniority in your job. But I did it the wrong way. But I enlisted in 1948 and at the time the Korean War started, I was in Fort Lewis, Washington. Within about—well—pretty soon, we found out we were going to go to Korea, and we arrived in Korea in September.

**Interviewer:** How did you get there? Did you get there by boat?

**Lawless:** Well, we went on what's called a—they had from the second World War, called Liberty Ships. There was a lot of them made during the war. They were made fast, and didn't cost as much as a bigger ship. They made a lot of them. We then went to the area on this Liberty Ship and then to get into Korea, we had to get into a what's called LST, a Landing Ship Transport. That was used—you went down the side of the ship on a rope into the landing craft. Then you land on the beach in the LST.

**Interviewer:** What kind of machinery did they give you to use?

**Lawless:** Well, we were a hospital unit. We had all kinds of medical equipment. The hospital operated as a hospital, but very close to the line – the front line – so that the men got there very quickly. That was the point, is getting the wounded man fast service before he died. So we were within a mile or two from wherever the fighting was.

**Interviewer:** What type of guns were you trained on or have to use in this mobile unit?

**Lawless:** Well, we just—as a medical department, they're not supposed to be using guns and all, because of the Geneva Convention. But North Koreans didn't follow that, so we had a carbine or a pistol.

**Interviewer:** You were speaking to me a little bit earlier that that was a lot like a M\*A\*S\*H unit.

**Lawless:** Well, that was this TV show M\*A\*S\*H—that's what was patterned after what the Army unit we had, called a Mobile Army Surgical Hospital, which people were brought to us on a helicopter or an ambulance, and they had the regular operating rooms and wards.

**Interviewer:** You mentioned when you were loaded off the main ship onto the other unit, that transported you to land—where did you first land at?

**Lawless:** On a beach. I couldn't tell you the name of the beach—whatever the beach they had available there at Inchon—what was called the Inchon Landing. That's where—earlier than that, the Army had to retreat all the way to the end of Korea, a city called Pusan, where they still had a small part of Korea where that they were still in control of, but not very much down in the south end. They needed to get into the upper part of Korea. So that was called Inchon Landing, where they made an invasion there at Inchon.

**Interviewer:** When you arrived, were you under fire?

**Lawless:** No, my unit got there within a couple of days after the first troops got there. By that time, there was no fighting really there. They had proceeded farther inward.

**Interviewer:** How far do you go in, once you landed?

**Lawless:** Well, after we landed, we got into a column of trucks with our equipment. We were going up a dirt road. During the night, then, sometime, we were stopped. We heard some gunfire, and the column stopped, and we were told to get out, get out in a ditch. So we got out and ran down in the ditch for a few hours. And then we found out what had happened was guerillas had been out on the side of the road and had hit the jeep that was in the front – the first vehicle, with an officer and driver. They were killed. A truck behind them, with eight soldiers in—and they were killed. And then sometime within a few hours of those, there was some Army around there that drove off those guerillas and killed some of them and drove the rest of them off. So during the morning, then, as I was walking up the road, I come around a curve in the road and I—this is what you call your heart jumps up in your throat! I seen this soldier sitting at the side of the road with a rifle on his knees and I thought, Oh my, I'm gonna get shot! But nothing happened. And then I see he had a hole right in the middle of his forehead. He's just sitting there dead but like he had been shot. There was a bullet hole right in middle of his forehead.

**Interviewer:** My goodness! So then what did you do? I mean, were you concerned about there may be others around him?

**Lawless:** No. By that time, we were told that it's all right, they had been cleared out. That's just that one that they just didn't do anything with the body.

**Interviewer:** Now, were you a Private First Class? Was that your title?

**Lawless:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** So what was your primary job within the unit?

**Lawless:** I was sometimes a guard, and other times just working in—with the doctors when people were brought in, and helping the doctors, you know—called a medical technician.

**Interviewer:** So come in and do just basically whatever—first aid, CPR, whatever you had to do. If you had to patch somebody—help patch them up—

**Lawless:** Uh huh, bandages and things, you know.

**Interviewer:** What type of—we were talking about this a little bit earlier—but what type of equipment did you have? You just had your bare necessities, I'm assuming, for out in the field.

**Lawless:** Well, we just had—they had about 15 trucks where they had X-ray machines and the operating room with the tables and the doctors' instruments. Um, I don't know that much about their machines, you know.

**Interviewer:** And a lot of morphine for those guys?

**Lawless:** Medical equipment, drugs and things that the doctors needed, you know.

**Interviewer:** What was probably one of the worst battles that you've seen?

**Lawless:** Well, at one time we had tents, you know, and one time they sent some kind of a shell in there and hit one of the tents and burned the tent down.

**Interviewer:** Did they have a lot of equipment and supplies in that tent?

**Lawless:** It was mostly a tent for just living in, sleeping in, you know.

**Interviewer:** Living quarters?

**Lawless:** There didn't happen to be anybody in it at the time, so nothing happened except the tent and the beds and everything burnt down.

**Interviewer:** Quite a bit of excitement, though, regardless.

**Lawless:** Uh-huh.

**Interviewer:** You said you were a guard and then you assisted with the doctors. What were some of your other job duties?

**Lawless:** Well, now, one time when I was on guard at the gate and across the road from us there was a house and I seen this Army vehicle come up there one time and stop, and some men got out and went in the house. And then in a little while later, they come out again, got in, went away. What I found out later was, was the North Koreans had come up there to that man's house, and they wanted him to be a spy. And of course, whatever he told them, I don't know. Maybe he didn't—maybe he said no or whatever, I don't know, but anyway, they took his baby away from him and took it away from him.

**Interviewer:** Because he wouldn't be a spy for them?

**Lawless:** Yeah, it must have been something like that.

**Interviewer:** I understand there was a lot of moving around, with different things going on out in the field. How often did your unit have to relocate?

**Lawless:** Oh, about a week or ten days, maybe two weeks, we would go from one place to another. At about Christmas, I think it was, yeah, Christmas—the end of 1950, Christmas, we had been surrounded, and there was two places there called Hamhung and Hungnam, right about the—almost at the north part of—the borderline where North Korea was. And we were all surrounded and couldn't out by land, so then the ships were brought to the coast there, at these two cities, and everyone eventually got on the ships and left then, there. So that is why later, they had to have the Inchon Landing, you know, because of that.

**Interviewer:** What were the weather conditions—

**Lawless:** Cold. Very cold. It's cold there in that part. Because I know—because sometimes I was outside out night on guard and very, very cold.

**Interviewer:** What were your provisions? What did you have to eat?

**Lawless:** Well, we had our—a lot of those called MREs (Meals Ready to Eat.)

**Interviewer:** So they kept you well fed?

**Lawless:** Yeah. But they had a kitchen where—when they were set up in a camp, there was a regular kitchen with regular food, you know.

**Interviewer:** How many military casualties would you say there were?

**Lawless:** Oh, oh, I don't know. I don't know. I couldn't say.

**Interviewer:** The living conditions? What were they like, there?

**Lawless:** I don't know. Where [hard to hear]

**Interviewer:** Where you lived. Your living quarters?

**Lawless:** Well, we had tents with Army cots, you know, those cots that fold up.

**Interviewer:** How did you stay warm? You would just build little fires?

**Lawless:** Oh, we had small stoves, you know—Burn oil, in the tent.

**Interviewer:** So you feel like you kept as warm as you could, under the circumstances.

**Lawless:** Yeah. You maybe have to get pretty close to that stove.

**Interviewer:** And then you had your outdoor showers and things. I mean, you didn't have anything enclosed. It was all pretty much—

**Lawless:** No, we had the—well, the latrines – that's a hole dug in the ground with a tent around it.

**Interviewer:** Did you treat quite a few Korean casualties or were they all American casualties?

**Lawless:** Part of the time we were at a civilian hospital there, and yes, I did see some people there. I seen one little boy where his shin was completely cut like this, the two parts.

**Interviewer:** It was separated and split apart there?

**Lawless:** Big cut right down there. And you could tell that he was very, you know, in pain. He was shaking and everything. It was very pitiful looking, you know. And I seen another—and I seen another body that had uh—the man had died—something—I don't—not sure what—cholera or something—he had died, and he was just laying on a board there in the tent, you know.

**Interviewer:** Just waiting to be buried. If a Korean Army [soldier] or a civilian came in there, and they passed away, would you bury them?

**Lawless:** No, we didn't. If they did any burying, they did that on their own, you know, at the hospital. They would have people that would do that, you know.

**Interviewer:** Did you have any special relationships, with some of the—like the young man that you mentioned that was [injured]? Did you get to know any of these people?

**Lawless:** No. No.

**Interviewer:** Not friends with anyone? You just strictly stayed businesslike and professional?

**Lawless:** Uh huh.

**Interviewer:** What did you do when things were calm? What did you do to pass the time?

**Lawless:** Well, if you had some books, you could read, or you had a radio or something—I had a camera. I took some pictures, you know.

**Interviewer:** What did you take pictures of?

**Lawless:** Well, here's a few here. There's a picture of, I think, the tent that got burned.

**Interviewer:** And this is the one that you mentioned where the whole tent caught on fire because of the shell?

**Lawless:** Yes. Yes, and that's me in a few pictures there.

**Interviewer:** Quite a handsome young man! Brings back a lot of memories, huh?

**Lawless:** (chuckles).

**Interviewer:** And this was taken here with the unit hospital? What was the name of the unit hospital that you were with?

**Lawless:** First Mobile Army Surgical Hospital.

**Interviewer:** Okay. And what are these pictures?

**Lawless:** These are when we arrived in Seattle. That's the ship and everyone that came on the ship arriving in Seattle.

**Interviewer:** While you were in Korea, it is my understanding that you were captured.

**Lawless:** No.

**Interviewer:** A prisoner of war?

**Lawless:** No, not me.

**Interviewer:** You weren't a prisoner of war?

**Lawless:** No.

**Interviewer:** Oh, okay. I thought that you were. So, while you were [in Korea]—I guess you were there a year, right? And then you were sent home?

**Lawless:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** But you did get a Bronze Star?

**Lawless:** Uh huh.

**Interviewer:** What were your accomplishments? How'd you get that Bronze Star?

**Lawless:** (laughs) Well, most people got it just for being there.

**Interviewer:** That was a big sacrifice that you made.

**Lawless:** They got a Korean medal, a Korean service medal. I think they—let's see: Army of Occupation medal with Japan clasp, Korean service medal with four Bronze stars. That's all.

**Interviewer:** Very impressive! You mentioned initially that you were from Canada.

**Lawless:** Well, I was born in Michigan, but that was during the Depression, and of course—but my mother and father were from Canada and my mother's father was still there in Canada, so they moved to Canada about 1933 and I ended up staying there until I was 18. My father came back to Michigan—I don't when it would be—probably around 1935 because Henry Ford had started hiring at that time. He went to work for Ford's there—Ford I think was—started off paying \$5.00 a day, which at that time was very good money! And there wasn't much work then, but then he, he stayed on there and worked there all through the war. But of course we didn't return to Michigan until 1948. I was only in there about a month before I went into the Army, which was my mistake, because they did have a bonus for the people that had been in Korea. Michigan paid a \$600 bonus, but I didn't get anything, because you had to be a resident for six months, and I had only been a resident for a month when I went in the Army, so they didn't give me a thing. (chuckles)

**Interviewer:** You didn't find that out until after you had enlisted?

**Lawless:** Well, we didn't know anything—When I went in the Army, we didn't know anything about that, until later, you know, after I had got out of the Army. I tried to get the bonus, and—

**Interviewer:** And didn't get it. And what are your parents' names? Your father and your mother, what are their names?

**Lawless:** Well, my father is dead, now. His name was Roy, Roy Joseph Lawless. My mother is dead, also. She just died. She was 101 years old and she only died in 2001.

**Interviewer:** What was her name?

**Lawless:** Elsie. At the time she died, her name—she had remarried—her name was Elsie Shire(?).

**Interviewer:** And what was her middle name?

**Lawless:** She was Elsie Ray—Elsie Ray Lawless. Middle—Maiden name was Blaney(?).

**Interviewer:** And was her family from Michigan?

**Lawless:** Uh, well, no, where they originally came from—probably from England, I think. Yeah.

**Interviewer:** Before you had enlisted in the military—I want to backtrack a little bit here and find out what you were doing at the time.

**Lawless:** My last job before I went in the Army was—I was a merchant seaman. And I had traveled to around England, Ireland, Scotland, Germany, Italy, Holland, Cuba and these different places on the ship.

**Interviewer:** What did you think the war was going to be like in your mind at the time when you enlisted?

**Lawless:** (chuckles) Well, I didn't know anything a war when I enlisted. It wasn't on at that time. I just thought I would be in the Army for a little while, because I would—I thought I'd best do that rather than get drafted. So—

**Interviewer:** So now that you're out, how did the military change your life?

**Lawless:** Well. (chuckles). I didn't like the Army at all when I was in it, you know. I didn't get along with it very well. But the time I—it changes you—by the time I was getting out of the Army, I didn't mind it so much.

**Interviewer:** Do you think it changed your plans as to what you anticipated doing before you got in? Maybe when you enlisted, you had anticipated it taking you down a whole different road.

**Lawless:** One of the things that I was going to do when I was in the Army, when I was still in Fort Lewis, I applied for a school to learn to make glasses—an optometry school they had. And I was due to go there in September, but because of the Korean War, I didn't go there. They cancelled that. That would have been a good job, I think, if I'd learned it, but by the time I got out of the Army, then I couldn't do it, because I didn't have enough time left, when I came back, you know.

**Interviewer:** You didn't have enough time left for what?



**Lawless:** When I come back to the United States, I didn't have time enough to go to school for that.

**Interviewer:** Was there a certain cut off age for that type of training?

**Lawless:** Well, it depended on how much time you had left to do in the Army. They're not going to send you to school if they can't—if they're not going to be using you for a certain time after and if you're going to be discharged, you know, they don't want to bother sending you to school.

**Interviewer:** So you weren't interested at that time then, to re-enlist. Because then you probably would have to go somewhere else rather than go through training again, right? To get the education—

**Lawless:** Well, I didn't plan on re-enlisting. I thought, Better go out and get some other kind of a job. (chuckles).

**Interviewer:** What type of a job did you get after you left the military?

**Lawless:** Well, at first I started out as an apprentice body repairman for a car, repairing cars, you know. But that didn't work out very well. They weren't helping very much to learn. They were expecting me to learn pretty much on my own, and I wanted somebody to show me things, you know, but they didn't do that, so—and then, because the boss didn't turn in reports on my progress, the VA cut off my money.

**Interviewer:** So you didn't get any more—

**Lawless:** So then, I stopped—I just quit there and I went to work—my brother worked for a Wiggly's supermarket chain there and he got me a job in their warehouse. I worked at that for five years, until they finally—they merged with another supermarket, and I got laid off my job. And I was out of work for a few months, until I got my job in the steel mill. And that's where I worked for 32 years, in the steel mill.

**Interviewer:** And you retired from the steel mill?

**Lawless:** Yeah. That turned out to be a pretty well-paying job. I got up to about \$50,000 a year before I retired, you know? And uh, it give me a pension, besides my Social Security, and a company pension, too, you know.

**Interviewer:** But since you were discharged from the military, you never thought about going to school on your own and getting the education for the training that you wanted?

**Lawless:** No, not at that. I was doing that in the body repair, but after that I just started working at that super market place, you know? Worked at that for a while. (chuckles). But I never did think about going back to school, then.

**Interviewer:** I wanted to go back a little bit to your military days, if I could, and get you back to the States. I was wondering when casualties and things came in, were they flown in? Were they driven in? How did they bring the casualties to your group?

**Lawless:** They came in on helicopter, usually, either helicopter or ambulance, but—The helicopter would land there and they rush them in to the tent, you know, for whatever could be done.

**Interviewer:** And how long did you stay in Korea?

**Lawless:** We were there—I was there a year. That was a time you normally spent – a year – before you were rotated—

**Interviewer:** Rotated out? Most of the time, did they just discharge the people after they served a time? Or if the people wanted to re-enlist, could they re-enlist?

**Lawless:** Oh, if you would want to re-enlist, they'd send you back to the United States first.

**Interviewer:** Are there any other stories that you can think of that you would like to share with me, that happened while you were there in Korea, or on your way, or on your way back?

**Lawless:** No, I don't think of anything else.

**Interviewer:** I think you did a great job, and I really do enjoy your stories, and getting to look at these pictures. I bet it brings back a lot of memories for you, too. It's a lot of good times to be proud of. It's a big sacrifice that you made, though.

**Lawless:** Uh huh.

**Interviewer:** Well, I appreciate it!

**Lawless:** You're welcome.